CHAPTER 16

U.S. Wildlife Agencies: Outdated, Misguided and Destructive

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In a functioning democracy, citizens have a very special power—they can affect policy. Unfortunately, this process is ineffective when citizens are uninformed. Wildlife policies are a case in point—outdated policies conflict with citizen's interests and harm wildlife, yet remain in place because so few of us are aware of these policies or the damage they do. Currently, wildlife policies in the U.S. benefit hunters and trappers, harm wildlife (including bears), and are contrary to the interests of the vast majority of U.S. citizens.

Historic Roots of the Problem

Theodore Roosevelt claimed that hunting had a civilizing effect on men, and advocated hunting as an outlet for a man's "virile impulses" (Kheel, *Nature* 70). For Roosevelt, the gentleman-hunter was the perfect model of manhood, wielding deadly power within the confines of prescribed rules—good sportsmanship rooted in the incongruity of "fair chase" ("History of the Boone").

In the late 19th century, Roosevelt, complained that commercial hunters had decimated wildlife—that a comparatively small population of "market" hunters profited while the nation was stripped of his favorite target species. To solve the problem, he founded the Boone and Crockett Club (BCC) in 1897, with the following mission: "to promote the conservation and management of wildlife, especially big game, and its habitat, to preserve and encourage hunting and to maintain the highest ethical standards of fair chase and sportsmanship in North America" ("About"). The BCC promoted laws to protect "every citizen's freedom to hunt and fish," and established wildlife as "owned by the people and managed in trust for the people by government agencies" ("About"). With this, the BCC put the government agencies in charge of managing wildlife *on behalf of hunters*: Early government wildlife conservation in the U.S. was thereby established *by* hunters *for* hunters in response to decimated "game" species (S. Fox 123).

Further sealing the fate of U.S. wildlife, Roosevelt placed his friend, Gifford Pinchot, in charge of the nation's freshly established National Forest Commission. Pinchot's family had earned their fortune logging; Pinchot was a member of BCC

and an avid hunter. He believed that natural "resources" should be "managed" to offer the greatest good to the greatest number. Though not explicitly stated, he was only concerned about the greatest good *for human beings*—he viewed forests and wildlife as means to human ends, and therefore advocated that government managed forests remain open for capitalistic enterprises. In contrast, other members of this early National Forest Commission hoped to establish government lands as "locked reserves," where forests and wildlife would not be exploited for personal gains ("Gifford"). But President Roosevelt chose Pinchot as the first head of a newly established Forest Service in 1905, sealing the fate of U.S. National Forests as reserves for "resources" to be "conserved" for human ends.

Roosevelt also established the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) with a network of 55 "game" reserves. These "refuges" have never been places where "game" animals can find refuge—they are lands where hunter-target populations are fostered on behalf of hunters ("History of Pelican"). The NWRS website provides "Your Guide to Hunting on National Wildlife Refuges," complete with a search engine that helps users "Find the Perfect Hunt" ("Your").

U.S. wildlife (and wilderness reserve) management was established by humans, for humans—more specifically, by and for hunters and trappers. Consequently, individual animals—especially non-target animals—are unimportant. Wildlife is maintained for the pleasure of the hunt. Few contemporary citizens are aware that wildlife agencies and their policies are designed to aid hunters and trappers—at the expense of wildlife *and* against the interests of the vast majority of non-hunting citizens. Federal and state wildlife agencies have preserved this special interest focus, and have therefore shown little interest in caring for injured or orphaned wildlife.

Power and Control Without Expertise or Responsibility

Given the history and established purpose of wildlife agencies, it is not surprising that relations between citizens engaged in wildlife rehabilitation and employees working for government wildlife agencies have often been less than ideal. Wildlife agencies in the U.S. are not concerned with maintaining balanced ecosystems or with assisting individual animals in need—they favor the interests of hunters and trappers: Thanks to Roosevelt, our wildlife policies are specifically designed to protect and enhance hunter-target species. For example, Alaska's wildlife management targets wolves in order to protect and bolster elk, caribou, and moose. Surveys now suggest that American black bears are killing young herbivores in Alaska, and state government agencies are looking to implement a trapping program to reduce black bear numbers on behalf of "big game" species.

Government officials are rarely educated or informed about (let alone trained or skilled in) wildlife rehabilitation—few have ever been directly involved with wildlife rehabilitation. Despite this lack of knowledge and experience, wildlife rehabilitation policies and procedures are controlled by government wildlife agencies. For example, rehabilitation facilities must be licensed by the government—it is illegal for citizens to keep wildlife without proper permits. Adding insult to injury, the government provides no financial support for rehabilitation, yet after months—or even years—of rehabilitation, government employees step in to control wildlife release. Needless to say, this is a frustrating situation for those working full-time in wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and release.

Furthermore, because wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and release are government controlled, relations between rescue organizations and government agencies are plagued by the hierarchical, red-tape-ridden, detatched-from-reality nature of government agencies. Wildlife policies are riddled with an unnerving array of procedures that must be followed in order to accomplish any given task. When dealing with wildlife issues, various state and federal government agencies also have to work with one another, and inter-agency interactions often come across as competition rather than cooperation, further foiling smooth interactions between government agencies and wildlife rescue organizations.

In contrast to government wildlife policies, rehabilitators devote tremendous time and effort to every injured or orphaned animal who comes into their care. Among government wildlife agency employees, many of whom are hunters, this is often viewed as sentimental, frivolous, and contrary to nature itself. Making relations yet more complicated, wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is often taken on by women of strength and courage, while government wildlife agencies tend to be conservative and conventional—and male-dominated.

Problematic Hunting Laws[1]

Bear hunting laws in the U.S. need to be revisited and revised. Current laws allow many questionable forms of sport hunting, forms that conflict with the hunter's own ethic of 'fair chase', and which are highly likely to result in orphaned cubs. In many states it is still legal to shoot American black bears in spring hunts, or with the help of either bait or hounds, and they may also be trapped.

1 Thanks to Adam Roberts of Born Free USA for necessary information on spring hunts, bear baiting, and hounding.

Spring Hunts

Bears emerge groggy and hungry from hibernation—a winter without food—and are therefore extremely vulnerable in the spring. Additionally many females emerge with new cubs who are completely dependent on their mothers. The hunter's ethic of "fair chase" ought to prevent hunting bears under these conditions, but in the absence of hunter commitment to "fair chase," most states have banned spring hunts. Other states have banned shooting mother bears in the spring, but given that it is impossible to visually distinguish a male bear from a female bear, this law is meaningless except when a cub accompanies the mother *and* the hunter notices this nearby cub. Not surprisingly, many mother bears are accidently shot in the course of spring hunts, leaving dependent orphans behind. Even though spring hunts are problematic on many levels, conflicting with the hunter's ethic of "fair chase," other states (for example, Maine, Idaho, and Montana) allow sport hunting for bears in the spring—both males and females.

Bear Baiting

Bear baiting is a practice whereby hunters repeatedly put out bait, such as a pile of fruit, both luring and habituating bears to a particular food site. Once the bears become frequent visitors to the food station, hunters hide with guns in hand in "blinds" (protected, hidden areas) to shoot bears who show up for a bite to eat. Bear baiting, like spring hunts, conflicts with the hunter's ethic of "fair chase," and is just as likely to result in orphaned cubs. Furthermore, bear baiting trains bears to seek out unnatural food sources—human food sources—drawing bears to human communities and campsites, increasing the likelihood of human-bear conflicts. Thankfully, bear baiting is illegal in most states, but again, this questionable sport is legal in some states (for example, Alaska, Wisconsin, and Minnesota).

Hounding

Some people train hounds to chase bears into trees, where bears are an easy target for hunters. This practice, called "hounding," is obviously stressful for bears. Even in rare cases where bears escape, the stress from such a chase can and does kill. In the spring bears are vulnerable because they have not eaten all winter. Bears chased in hot weather, or just before hibernation (when they carry a good deal of extra weight), can easily overheat. Additionally, hounding frequently separates mothers from cubs, leaving orphans to be consumed by predators, to starve, or to be torn to pieces by pursuing hounds. Does this not conflict with the hunter's ethic of "fair chase"? Either way, hounding remains legal in many states, only some of which have limited the number of hounds that may be turned onto an unsuspecting bear.

Trapping

Many U.S. states permit bear trapping (including Alaska and Maine). In some states it is legal for trappers to lure bears into snares and traps with bait, leaving food in a particular area for some time before setting traps, training bears to frequent areas where trappers intend to set traps.

Trappers use both cage traps and snares. Cages are more humane (and less common) provided they are checked daily. Obviously, it is inhumane to hold a wild animal in a cage, day after day, where they have no access to food, water, or shelter. Foothold traps are designed to clamp onto an animal's leg when their foot lands on a steel plate in the center of the trap, triggering two spring-loaded metal jaws. Foothold traps cause hematomas and deep lacerations, and can dislocate joints, cause fractures, and damage teeth and gums when wild animals turn on offending traps with their powerful jaws. Like those left in cages, animals caught in steel-jawed traps do not have access to food, water, or shelter, and they are also in severe pain. A snare is a wire noose designed to catch a passing animal and tighten when the animal struggles to escape, thereby, cutting off circulation, and often cutting through flesh to bone. Snares tighten on a bear's leg, foot, or neck—whichever body part becomes caught.

While state regulations sometimes require trappers to check cages, traps, and snares at regular intervals, usually every couple of days, such legislation is impossible to enforce. No one but the trapper knows where these devises are set. The reality is that trapped animals often wait, filled with pain and terror, without access to food, water, or shelter, for very long periods of time.

Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release—Outdated, Unfounded Fears

Wildlife agencies in the U.S. remain under the shadow of Roosevelt's late 19th-century approach to "management," and by the tendency of these archaic institutions to attract employees who hunt and trap. These employees are therefore among a very small minority of U.S. citizens who tend to care a great deal about hunter and trapper target populations, but very little about any single wild animal. Government agencies are, by nature, slow moving. In any event, few government wildlife agency employees are interested in changing policies that have long favored hunters. And few government wildlife agency employees are interested in taking even a small measure of responsibility for the expense and labor of wildlife rehabilitation—though they certainly intend to continue controlling those who engage in wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and release.

This outdated government wildlife management mentality hinders rescue and rehabilitation in the U.S., and harms wildlife in a handful of important ways—especially with regard to bears.[2] For example, Government officials continue to believe that it is best to kill a cub who was under the care of a mother bear killed for frequenting campgrounds. While it is true that cubs learn pretty much everything they need to know from their mothers, rehabilitated cubs are definitely not destined to become campground foragers just because their mothers were. Data demonstrates that rescued, rehabilitated cubs are no more likely to become "problem bears" than wild-reared bears.

Even more problematic, government wildlife "experts" have long asserted that orphaned cubs cannot be reared by humans and then successfully released back into the wild, because such bears will starve and/or become "problem bears." While it is true that mothers teach cubs how and where to forage, it has been demonstrated that human-reared bears do not starve without this natural and preferred education. Furthermore, human-reared bears do not automatically seek out human beings in the event of a food shortage. While bears are easily food conditioned—especially American black bears—the idea that hand-reared bears are destined to become "problem bears" has been thoroughly disproven by decades of rehabilitators. Nonetheless, this fear lingers in government agencies, and is sealed into policies and procedures, hindering—and even blocking—rehabilitation efforts.

Most disturbing, many government wildlife agency employees cling to the outdated notion that bears in rehabilitation—because they can be dangerous to human beings—ought to be kept in constant fear of caretakers. These stalwarts argue that cubs who do not fear humans will become "problem bears"—perhaps dangerous—once released. Accordingly, "old-school" wildlife "experts" suggest harming and terrifying cubs during rehabilitation—using cattle prods or clubs to establish an intense fear of humans. While this would definitely instill a lasting fear, this fear would just as surely erode a dependent orphan's physical and mental health. In any event, release data demonstrates (beyond a shadow of a doubt) that such old-school fears are unfounded—that such cruelty is entirely unnecessary.

Rescue, Rehabilitation, and Release—Legitimate Concerns

Fragmented, diminished habitat is the biggest threat to bears around the world (as for wildlife more generally). Humans have spread across the planet, mowing down forests, plowing prairies, and building settlements wherever we go.

2 Thanks to Sally Maughan and Valerie Stephan-LeBoeuf (from Idaho Black Bear Rehab, Inc.) for information on bear rescue, rehabilitation, and release.

Given that bears *already* lack sufficient habitat, and that bear habitat continues to shrink, one legitimate concern with regard to rehabilitation is where to release rehabilitated bears.

Any decrease in habitat is accompanied by an increase in the likelihood of human-bear conflicts. While American black bears aren't normally aggressive, they are quite capable of injuring or killing a human being. Many people don't want bears around their homes or neighborhoods. While this reluctance may be understandable, a lack of habitat (due to human breeding) is actually the problem—not bears. If we are to protect dwindling wild spaces, we must curb our population growth. For example, we will need to eliminate tax incentives that encourage larger families, and remind one another that no single person is entitled to more than one child—no two people are entitled to more than two children, no matter how many times they remarry, no matter how much they love children, and no matter how proud they are of their genetic inheritance. We must also revisit our unequivocal devotion to individual freedoms—especially with regard to reproduction—in light of the needs of other animals, and in light of our utter dependence on a limited planet.

Another common reason for killing (rather than rescuing) bears is a lack of rehabilitation facilities. Preferably, every state where bears live in the wild would have a bear rehabilitation facility—a place for bears-in-need to recover. But bear rehabilitation is land intensive, time consuming, expensive, and requires specialized knowledge and skills. Most states have a fair number of wildlife facilities, but there are precious few bear specialists anywhere in the world, likely because each rescued bear consumes large quantities of specialized foods, and requires a very secure enclosure and knowledgeable caretakers. While most extended communities are able and willing to sustain one wildlife rehabilitation facility (usually one that rehabilitates a variety of species) this same demographic is much less likely to be able and willing to support an additional wildlife facility designed for bear rescue and rehabilitation. Bear rehabilitators are often dependent on larger wildlife organizations, such as the World Society for the Protection of Animals, to make ends meet. Bear rehabilitation is also labor intensive—young cubs must be bottle-fed at regular intervals, day and night. All told, about $5600 will carry a bear (without special needs) through the rehabilitation process—it costs far more to see an injured bear through the same process. Initially, many wildlife rehabilitators work fulltime jobs to support their work. Given the plethora of expenses, and the initial investment required, bears often fall between the cracks. A more dependable source of funding is needed for wildlife rehabilitation.

Why Rehabilitate Bears?

Most citizens erroneously believe that government wildlife agencies help injured and orphaned wildlife. As may now be obvious, this is not the case (unless shooting such animals is viewed as "help"—and sometimes a quick end may truly be the kindest option). Wildlife agencies neither engage in nor fund wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, or release, though they control all three. It is time for relevant government agencies to shift focus and take responsibility for these essential wildlife activities. There are several compelling reasons supporting this shift in policy, procedures, and purse strings.

First, it makes no sense for government agencies to control policies and procedures for a specialized area of work about which they know little and in which they have little investment. It also makes no sense for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation to be left to citizens who, out of concern and compassion, take on this difficult responsibility at their own expense, with whatever funds they can muster. *The health and welfare of wild animals is a public concern, and a public responsibility.* Therefore, wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and release ought to be tax-funded.

Second, rather than wildlife management on behalf of 5 percent of the population (hunters), as initiated by Roosevelt, government wildlife agencies ought to engage in rescue, rehabilitation, and release on behalf of the majority of today's tax-paying citizens. While hunters and hunting have declined steadily in the last fifty years, wildlife watchers have grown by one million *each year* between 1996 and 2001 (Robertson 153). Hunters declined 100,000 each year between 2001 and 2006—despite an overall population increase of 15 million—while wildlife watching enjoyed an 8 percent increase just since 2001 ("News"; Robertson 153). "The ratio of non-hunting outdoor enthusiasts to hunters grew more than 26 percent in the last ten years"—there are now six times as many nonhunting wildlife enthusiasts as there are hunters (Robertson 153). "Comparatively speaking, the body of hunters in America is withered and shrunken, only a wee fraction of its former self" (Robertson 152). Despite expensive hunter recruitment programs (many of which targeted women and children), even FWS was compelled to admit in 2008 that "the participation rates and economic impact of hunting and fishing now trail those of wildlife watching" (*2006* 5; Reed).

Funds for rehabilitation can be gathered by taxing outdoor recreation supplies. Today, "kinder, gentler outdoorspeople are far outspending hunters" with U.S. wildlife watchers contributing $46 billion to local, regional, and national economies (Robertson 153). For example, in 2006 hunters spent only $138.5

million in Wyoming, while wildlife watchers spent a whopping $392.4 million. Though hunting is considerably more popular in Wyoming than in most states, twice as many people watched Wyoming wildlife as hunted Wyoming wildlife ("Helping" 1; *2006* 96, 102). Unlike citizens in Roosevelt's time, hunters now spend less than "nature lovers," who buy everything from "bird food to binoculars, from special footwear to camera equipment," spending large sums simply "to enjoy wildlife" ("Federal"). It would now be more effective to fund wildlife rescue and rehabilitation programs via an excise tax on outdoor recreation supplies such as tents, hiking boots, climbing gear, sleeping bags, binoculars, backpacks, life preservers, skis, canoes—perhaps even photography sales.

Many citizens, myself included, are deeply thankful to be able to turn to experts when faced with an injured fawn or raven in need of veterinary care. Similarly, those confronted with a orphaned cub eating garbage from local dumpsters likely prefer to call wildlife rescue rather than wildlife extermination, which is the dominant response of government wildlife agencies when faced with orphaned cubs.

Third, rescue, rehabilitation, and release yields valuable information that cannot be attained in any other way. Bear rehabilitators are able to gather information regarding diet and medical care, physiology and cub development, behavior, tendencies, and personalities. Even after rehabilitation, bears are released with collars that provide yet more information on bear behavior, ranges, and a variety of factors that affect bear survival. Information collected through rehabilitation and release has proven vital to individuals and organizations working to save endangered bears around the world—a worthy investment for government wildlife agencies in the U.S.—certainly more worthy in the eyes of the vast majority of citizens than manipulating wildlife populations on behalf of hunters.

Finally—and most importantly—wildlife agencies ought to rescue, rehabilitate, and release wildlife (including bears) because wildlife is a public responsibility, and because we owe them this basic decency as partial compensation for the many harms and injustices we bring upon them. Humans often cause suffering and misery for wildlife—we mow them down with vehicles, take over their essential habitat, and shoot nursing mothers, leaving orphaned young. Animals—all of us—suffer when we are injured, or lose our homes or are orphaned. We enjoy whatever pleasures life offers, and we strive to avoid misery and premature death. The best outcome for any orphaned or injured bear is, as it would be for any human being, to be rescued, rehabilitated, and released. To make this financially feasible and so that we might take responsibility for that which is rightfully our collective responsibility, government wildlife agencies ought to engage in wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and release.

Change is Possible—Even for Government Agencies

Roosevelt and his BCC cohorts created a wildlife management program whereby "those who use the resource ... pay for its care and maintenance" ("About"). Today, surveys indicate that the vast majority of U.S. citizens invest in outdoor recreation that is not deadly, while less than 5 percent of the U.S. population hunts. Consequently, rather than manipulate wildlife on behalf of a tiny special interest group, it is well past time for government wildlife agencies to invest tax dollars to assist displaced and injured wildlife.

This shift in focus and purpose will place government wildlife agencies that already control policies and procedures for wildlife rehabilitation, in charge of what ought to be the most important aspect of wildlife "management"—the actual labor of rescue, rehabilitation, and release. As this change in duties is implemented, it makes sense to employ those who have long been working in rescue, rehabilitation, and release, and who already have strong skills and years of experience in this line of work. To fund this shift in responsibilities, taxes need to be redirected, starting with the $115 million now spent each year to eliminate predators (in order to bolster hunter-target species and on behalf of ranchers) and funds directed toward hunter recruitment programs. Additionally, outdoor equipment can be taxed—kayaks and camp stoves and climbing helmets. Taxing those who use wilderness, and who prefer wildlife on the hoof, can provide financial support for wildlife rescue, rehabilitation, and release.

While change does not come easily, placing government wildlife agencies in charge of rescue, rehabilitation, and release will bring many benefits. Government wildlife agencies have much to gain from realigning with the majority of citizens, and much to lose by continuing to cater to a dwindling minority of hunters. Moreover, they will be doing the work that they ought to be doing—"managing" wildlife on behalf of the American people. Those currently engaged in rescue, rehabilitation, and release also have much to gain—most notably, they will gain a say in policies, a dependable paycheck in exchange for their labor, and adequate funds to tend needy wildlife placed in their care. America's beleaguered wildlife also have much to gain. Instead of manipulating their populations to grow hunter target species, we can take responsibility for wildlife that we displace and injure. And where wildlife benefit, so do citizens: our lands will foster a natural mix of species (rather than a proliferation of hunter-target species and a dearth of natural predators), and we will have somewhere to turn if we come upon injured or orphaned wildlife.

Conclusion

We live in a democracy—each of us is responsible to help bring desired and necessary change. If we would like government wildlife agencies to cater to the needs of the majority in the U.S. (and the needs of wildlife), we must write to senators and representatives and ask that government wildlife agencies stop catering to minority hunters at the expense of wildlife and the majority of citizens. We must tell those in congress that we prefer tax dollars invested in compassionate wildlife programs designed to protect and preserve wildlife—and that we do not want to pay government employees to run a bullet through an orphaned bear on the assumption that an individual bear does not matter.

Until rescue, rehabilitation, and release are government funded—as they should be—we must support private rescue, rehabilitation, and release through donations—including donations of money, time, requested goods, and/or skills. When we help nonhuman animals—when we help those who are least able to help themselves—we foster a community of sharing, a community where no one is left out in the cold, a community in which we can be proud to live. Selfish gains end with us, but gains for the greater good have a ripple effect that continue long after we are gone.

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